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'Honestly, Nancy, these leaks have me baffled'

Keeping the Nation's Secrets

Richard Nixon had his "plumbers" to plug government leaks—and now, so the joke goes, Ronald Reagan has turned to "electricians." But despite a public obsession with leaks and the use of lie-detector tests to unmask offenders, the Reagan Administration has had no more success than its predecessors in keeping secrets. Last week, on the verge of enacting a bill to make disclosing the name of an American intelligence operative a crime, it was forced to request the resignation of William H. Kenney, the Reagan-appointed U.S. Attorney in San Diego, when he revealed a key CIA intelligence source in Mexico to a San Diego newspaper. And meanwhile, the Administration has been pursuing a new and disturbing tactic—trying to regain, occasionally through intimidation, secrets that are already legally in the public domain.

Stephen Green, 41, a former United Nations Disaster Relief Office employee, for example, had obtained 30-year-old declassified documents from the National Archives and Records Service for a book on U.S.-Israeli relations, but needed additional information on a disclosure that Israel had blown up a plane assigned to a U.S. military attaché after it had photographed Israeli military installations. When he asked for the additional material, Green was requested to return the original 47 pages for a review. "I assure you that our review of these pages will be swiftly completed, and the reproductions will be immediately returned," Edwin Thompson, director of the Archives' declassification system, wrote Green. One month after Green returned the documents, the materials were sent back to him—minus eleven pages and numerous excised passages of now "classified" material cut out by the Air Force.

the benefits of language training, now read: "There has been no return [cut out] brought on by my study of Hebrew."

The approach to James Bamford, who is writing a book on the National Security Agency, was less duplicitous. In 1979 Bamford obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) sanitized versions of two top-secret reports on U.S. electronic eavesdropping operations. More than two years later Bamford was informed that the reports weren't sanitized enough. "You are currently in possession of classified information that requires protection against unauthorized disclosure," a Department of Justice attorney wrote him. "It is . . . your duty and obligation as a United States citizen to return this information." Since that request was made, the only apparent sensitive disclosure—that the British had assisted U.S. intelligence in intercepting overseas cables sent by American antiwar and civil-rights activists—has been published in several newspapers. But the Reagan Administration appears intent on using the Bamford case to support its attempt to exempt intelligence agencies from the FOIA.

New Order: Last week the President moved to codify this new policy. He issued an Executive order that makes it harder for the public to get information declassified and reverses a Jimmy Carter policy that did not permit the government to reclassify information that had been properly declassified. The Reagan order permits the government to pursue secrets that can be "reasonably recovered," but doesn't define "reasonable." Critics say that it is absurd to try to keep a secret once it has been let out, and that the new policy puts the burden of keeping secrets on authors and journalists,

Taken with the other White House secrecy initiatives, the order seems likely to solidify the Administration's hard line on classification. Ralph McGehee, a retired CIA officer writing a book on the agency, can attest to that approach. He first submitted his manuscript to the CIA for a security review in February 1980. But last year, when he submitted a revised chapter, McGehee was ordered to delete passages that had previously been approved. When he asked why the information had been reclassified, he was told that previously "mistakes" had been made. On appeal, Deputy CIA Director Bobby Inman reinstated all but five sentences. But with the new Executive order, Inman could have ruled against McGehee.

For years the government has been lax to the point of incompetence in keeping secrets. Few U.S. intelligence losses, for example, have rivaled the one that stemmed from the government personnel's botched handling of top-secret papers before the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Iran. And for years, the identity of American agents was available to any trained eye perusing career patterns and job designations in two publications—the Foreign Service List and The Biographic Register. While those documents are now classified, a generation of agents was exposed because, for example, CIA personnel assigned to embassies were lumped with the "Foreign Service reserve." Now the Reagan Administration plans to make up for that incompetence by trying to get that information back from the public.

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in Washington